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NANCY WILSON HOLDS A SPECIAL place in the annals of rock guitar: as a player, singer, and songwriter for Heart, she brought her acoustic vision to the rock 'n' roll table and demanded to be heard. Integrating sophisticated acoustic fingerstyle and rhythm work into a high-energy electric landscape, Nancy and her sister Ann, the band's scorching lead singer, scored numerous hits and platinum albums over the course of 20 years. Since the last Heart performance in 1995, Nancy has continued to earn respect for her artistic integrity, outstanding vocals, and guitar craft, working with Ann as a duo and in the band the Lovemongers. And now for the first time since college, Nancy has stepped out solo with *Live at McCabe's Guitar Shop*, an all-acoustic set on which she revisits Heart classics like "These Dreams" and "Even It Up" along with her own new

concert pianist touring the college circuit and a choir vocalist, and their father sang in choirs and barbershop quartets and led the Marine Corps Band while in the military. Wilson remembered, "On Sunday we'd have pancakes and opera. My dad would be conducting in the living room. We'd turn it way up and rock. There was everything from classical music to Ray Charles, Judy Garland, Peggy Lee, bossa nova, and early experimental electronic music. I now realize how completely rich an upbringing we had. We've known friends who didn't even have a stereo while growing up. A lot of musical talent may be inborn, but nurturing that expression is a huge part of it, and it's got to happen early for it to really happen. I learned a tremendous amount early on about music theory—intervals and structure—just by singing harmonies, and those things really figure into how I play."

*Nancy Wilson's driving guitar work helped define the sound of
a classic rock 'n' roll band*

By Julie Bergman

songs and covers of Paul Simon, Joni Mitchell, Peter Dinklage, and others.

In the wake of the *McCabe's* release, I visited Wilson at her ranch outside Seattle, where she lives with her husband, film director and former *Rolling Stone* writer Cameron Crowe, and a slew of springer spaniels and Arabian horses. We sat down and talked about her beginnings as a guitarist, the heydays of Heart, and the emergence of her musical style. The years fronting Heart have lent Wilson an unassuming confidence and a belief that music is all about expression and sharing, which in her case began at home.

Nancy and Ann's family environment was music at its best from the outset. Their mother was a

Wilson had a few years of piano lessons as a child, but by the time she was nine years old and the Beatles landed on American soil, guitar became her universe. "Guitar consumed me," she recalled. "Right after the Beatles were on *Ed Sullivan*, I had to have a guitar. My first guitar was one of those plywood three-quarter-sized Lyles that had one of the biggest bottle-shaped necks. There was no possible way a nine- or ten-year-old, or even a 30-year-old, could barre a chord on it." The neck helped Wilson develop strong fingers, though, and whenever Ann left her nylon-strung Harmony unattended, Nancy would pick it up. "It was so much easier to play, it gave me hope," she said.



GUITAR
QUEEN OF
HEART

Neither Ann nor Nancy had formal guitar instruction, but they dove straight into the folk and rock music that was exploding in the 1960s. "We got the Mel Bay guitar book that everybody got and learned how to finger the basic chords," Wilson recalled. "We learned off Beatles records. I knew every Beatles song, and still do. I also learned a lot of fingerstyle off Paul Simon. I learned [the Davey Graham cover] 'Angie' pretty much note for note. There were a couple of jazz chords that he threw in at the end, which were a little challenging for a 12-year-old, but 'Angie' became my calling card. I'd go down to the local music store, Bandwagon, and play that song on the better guitars, and people would be impressed. It was my first feeling of what it would be like to have an audience."

In keeping with the mood of the times, Ann and Nancy memorized Bob Dylan

songs and other protest songs and made the most of them. "We'd go to Ann's home-room at school and sing Dylan songs, all 58 verses," she said. "It was the late '60s, and it was all about protest." While other

at guitar. "Joni Mitchell figured in for me from her very first album," Wilson recalled. "Her tunings were like a gift from above." Wilson began making use of dropped-D tuning and double

"There weren't any other women out there doing exactly what we were doing, but we were undaunted because we didn't know any better."

young female players may have been daintily plucking away, Nancy and Ann already had a mission. They wanted to rock, and folk rock was the immediate solution.

Thrown into this mix of musical influences was a large dose of Joni Mitchell, whose use of altered tunings changed the way Nancy Wilson looked

dropped-D (lowering both the high and low E strings to D), but her desire to sound like she was playing in open tunings while staying close to standard began to shape her playing. "In a live situation, if it's not just your own show and you don't have four extra guitars sitting there, changing tunings is rough," she explained. "So I started to find ways of making regular tuning sound like an open tuning. Even today, I let a lot of strings ring and stay away from thirds. I use a lot of perfect open fourths and fifths, augmented fourths, and diminished fifths—the 'devil's interval.'"

Another signature Wilson technique is combining the use of a flatpick with fingerstyle playing, which she demonstrates in her instructional video for Starlicks Master Sessions (see discography, page 61). "I started out playing with my fingers and learned Travis picking," she recalled, "but with the types of songs Ann and I, and eventually Heart, were doing, I wanted to be loud. I knew I had to learn to use a flatpick, but then I couldn't play fingerstyle, so initially I went to using a thumbpick. In those days, the thumbpicks were all too large for women, and I was lucky if I could find three in a year that fit. I would get Scotch tape and wrap it around to make it like a ring. I also tried to use steel fingerpicks, but they were too cumbersome because I'd have to take them off for certain songs. I also tried acrylic nails, but I played so much strong rhythm that there would be nails flying all over the place, so eventually I just adapted to using a flatpick and my second and third fingers."

When Nancy was in junior high school and Ann was in high school, they played in such bands as the Rapunzel and the Viewpoint. "We were always recruiting [people] who didn't



LANCE MERRER



Ann and Nancy lead a Wilson family hootenanny, 1966. Below, 12-year-old Nancy picks a nylon-string.

know what they were doing," Wilson remembered, "just telling our friends, 'You've got to be in our band.' We had four girls standing and singing with two acoustic guitars and a full band behind them of all these guys who were just learning to play." By the Rapunzel era, Nancy had acquired a Harmony nylon-string guitar on which she alternated between rhythm parts and fingerstyle playing, and Ann continued to play rhythm while they traded off and harmonized on vocals. Life was a succession of performances anywhere the Wilson sisters could find an audience. "We were Beatles fans who wanted to be the Beatles, not be their girlfriends," Wilson said.

When Ann graduated from high school, Nancy played the solo coffeehouse circuit and then spent a year and a half playing originals and folk covers in the Elton John/Joni Mitchell/Paul Simon vein while at college in Oregon. "I was doing the folksy thing, although I was also playing 'Stairway to Heaven,'" she said. She saved sufficient funds to buy her first real steel-string, a Gibson J-40. "That was my coffeehouse guitar. The Gibson was really solid and pretty loud. I miss that guitar. It's like a love affair that ended, but you really remember the relationship you had." Ovation guitars were new at the time,

and when Wilson teamed up with another guitarist to form the short-lived duet Geoff and Nancy, she borrowed an Ovation and discovered the perfect solution for bringing the acoustic into a rock setting.

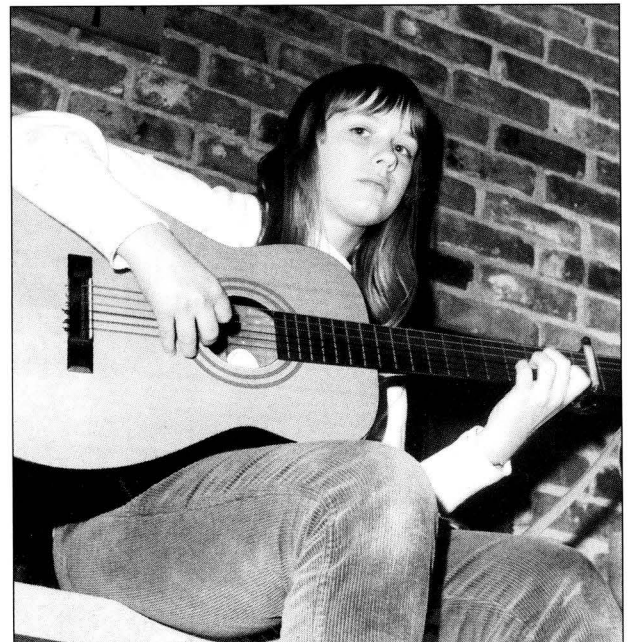
Ann was already fronting the band Heart, a top hard rock act in Vancouver. "I had an open invitation to join Heart, which I knew I would do," said Nancy. "I'd spent enough time at college to find myself as a person and a songwriter, so I decided I was going to join Heart [in 1974] and see the world. I started to be the acoustic influence on Heart. The band was playing a few originals, but Ann and I started writing right away and we wanted to incorporate the acoustic into the hard rock. Led Zeppelin was an influence on us, because they had both electric and acoustic. That was our focus. We were going to redefine the band, and we did. We got turned down by every major label, twice, in the process."

Early Heart consisted of the Wilsons, Roger Fisher on guitar, Steve Fossen on bass, John Hannah on Hammond organ, and various drummers. "We always had the drummer blues. There were more drummers in Heart than any other player. They would just combust," Wilson said. Heart wanted another guitarist who could double on keyboards after John Hannah left, and Howard Leese fit the bill. Leese was producing at Can-Base Studios in Vancouver, and he facilitated Heart's first recording for the small Canadian label Mushroom Records in 1975.

Initially, Nancy played mostly acoustic rhythm and some electric lead. "I played electric when they needed me to fill in," she recalls, "but mostly I stuck to acoustic. In the heavier rock context, I found that I was the percussionist." The long acoustic intro and outro framing the visceral, hard-rocking "Mistral Wind" on the album *Dog and Butterfly* epitomizes what Wilson was contributing to the band's sound. "If there was one song that captured the Heart sound poetically and musically," says Wilson, "it was 'Mistral Wind.'"

Heart's vision of conjoining acoustic and electric sounds really began to evolve in the studio. Nancy's confidence from years of playing was not about to disintegrate under the pressure of gender bias in the music industry, which often pushed women's guitar work into the background. She had the courage of her convictions, the support of her brilliantly talented sister on stage and in the studio, and the help of her

Continued on page 58



oldest sister, Lynn (who also contributed background vocals), behind the scenes. "On the first album, I did an acoustic instrumental piece, 'Silver Wheels,' which introduced 'Crazy on You,'" Nancy recalled. "I really wanted people to know right up front what I could do. It was the same thing as sitting in the Bandwagon music store and playing 'Angie.' It was like, 'Check me out, I know some stuff.'"

Although there were strong female singers in rock, such as Janis Joplin and Grace Slick, Heart was the first rock band whose driving musical and creative force came from two women. "There weren't any other women out there doing exactly what we were doing," said Wilson, "but I think we were undaunted because we started so young and we didn't know any better."

Through the first decade of Heart's success, the Wilsons retained a fair amount of control over the band's career, but there were serious challenges along the way. "In the beginning," Nancy recalled, "the label wanted to lose everybody except Ann. Ann had a lot of



At 18: Wilson played solo in college coffeehouses.

offers. She turned down a lot of money to stick with the band, which was fortunate for me.

"Sometimes it didn't feel like we had control, but in the end, Ann has

such instinct as a leader, especially on a business level. So she's always been the watchdog on the business end, and I was the watchdog of the artistic bullshit meter. Between the

WHAT THEY PLAY

Nancy Wilson depended on six- and 12-string Ovation to get her through the early years of melding acoustic playing with hard rock, and she still uses a 1992 Ovation she calls Burley. "I had to have an Ovation for big, live shows," she says. "There was no feedback; I was able to turn up the volume all the way and let the soundman tweak it."

Takamine guitars became another staple while Wilson was on the road with Heart. "I saw Pete Townshend using one and loved the sound of it," Wilson recalls. "I was looking for something other than an Ovation, because I craved that more acoustic sound. The Ovation is great for a more percussive sound, but it has its own distinctive place. The Takamine is really an all-around stage guitar. I just run it flat and all the way up." She currently uses an NP-18C and an NP-15C, both cutaways built of Indian rosewood with Sitka spruce tops.

When she recorded her premiere instrumental, "Silver Wheels" (*Dog and Butterfly*), Wilson played a "big, fat-bodied" Guild owned by Heart's then-producer Mike Flicker. In 1976, Vancouver-based luthier Ed Myronyk built Wilson a steel-string called the Libra Sunrise, on which she recorded "Mistral Wind." Reminiscent of a Martin D-28, the Sunrise guitar is made of Brazilian rosewood with a bear-claw spruce top. It's equipped with a Fishman pickup, and Wilson still takes it on the road (though reluctantly). "My Sunrise just gets better and better," she says.

Wilson also has a 12-fret Martin 12-string, model D12-45, made in 1974. Sometimes she strings the top E and B strings with double courses and leaves the rest of the strings as singles—a trick she picked up from Nashville. Her extensive guitar collection also includes the Lady, a small-bodied classical made in 1975 by German luthier Hermann Hauser; a

small-bodied acoustic-electric built by Danny Ferrington; a wood and a steel National; and vintage Fender and Gibson lap steels.

Wilson runs her acoustic guitars into a Juice Box (a tube direct box made by Retrospec) and then straight into the mixer. She uses a Trace Elliot amplifier at home and on stage as an acoustic guitar monitor. She plays with heavy Dunlop Tortex picks and medium-gauge D'Addario phosphor-bronze acoustic strings.

Her well-worn collection of vintage electrics includes a Gibson ES-330 hollow-body, an original Flying V, a 1965 Fender Strat, and a late model Fender Thinline Telecaster. "The electric guitar is a totally different instrument to play, but you can get away with a somewhat similar feel to an acoustic if you play a Tele with heavier strings," she says. Her favorite electric is a vintage Les Paul Jr. modeled after an instrument built for Les Paul's wife. "It's a lady's size and has a lot of personality," Wilson says. Her preferred electric amps are a Marshall stack and a Mesa Boogie. "In the studio I like to use a Fender Twin Reverb and a Marshall combination," she says, "because you can get all of that drama and the fattest of sounds without playing so hard."

On the 1999 Ann and Nancy Wilson tour, Nancy is playing Takamines equipped with Fishman Matrix II under-saddle pickups as well as a 1979 Japanese-built mandolin, a close copy of her vintage Gibson mandolin, which stays at home. On some songs she used a flanger effects pedal on her guitars. A new addition to her touring rig is an Atomic Boot Box (built by her nephews Tohn and Reed Keagle) similar to the stomp board used by Chris Whitley, which provides a bass drum sound.

two of us, we struggled through somehow.”

Heart made seven top-selling records, including *Dreamboat Annie* (1976), *Little Queen* (1977), *Dog and Butterfly* (1978), and *Bebe Le Strange* (1980), before making a commercial breakthrough in 1985 with the five million-selling *Heart*. But the 1980s version of Heart was less true to Ann and Nancy’s original vision. “In the ’80s there was pressure to reinvent ourselves,” Nancy explained, “to get a new management company and play other songwriters’ material. The whole atmosphere, the collective consciousness of the ’80s, was very strange. It became a scramble to try to inject our artistic imprint into that time, because most of the songs were from outside writers, and in the ’80s the acoustic guitar took more of a backseat. There was all this new technology, bells and whistles and smoke, and everyone in the industry was so coked out, they couldn’t stop using them. There was no restraint and no objectivity. I had producers tell me, ‘Oh no, we don’t need an acoustic guitar in this song; we need more keyboards.’ So I played more electric, and the multilayered keyboard

The best songwriting, Wilson says, happens when you do the music and lyrics all at once and “let it come out of you without thinking so hard about it.”

(what I call the ‘wedding-cake sound’) took over for a while. The power ballad was the Godzilla of the day. It was kind of a fun costume party, but I was really glad when bands from Seattle like Pearl Jam and Soundgarden came in and kicked the butts of the whole thing. I thought, ‘Thank God it’s over, because there was nowhere for this to go.’”

After two decades of touring, 20 million records sold, and a huge output of rock classics, such as “Crazy on You,” “Magic Man,” “Barracuda,” “Even It Up,” and “These Dreams,” the Wilson sisters were ready for a change. Heart’s final tour in 1995, in support of the band’s swan song recording *The Road Home*, was a heavi-

went back to our roots. We became the in-town benefit band for quite a few years. We had just done 20 years of touring and felt it was time to concentrate on writing and doing it in some fresh way. The Lovemongers also provided us with a situation where we could go into clubs again. We got back to what we were in this thing for, and it restored our



Heart rock, 1978: Howard Leese, Steve Fossen, Nancy Wilson, Michael Desrosier, and Ann Wilson.

ly acoustic affair. “I went through the whole Heart catalog to see what songs would lend themselves to a more acoustic presentation,” Nancy said. She

faith in the whole business. We didn’t have any management; we didn’t have a record company. It was a lot of work and no money, but we were making enough not to lose money.” The Lovemongers released *Whirligig* in 1997 and a Christmas album in 1998. Nancy has gone back to basics with her writing as well, pursuing the philosophy that songwriting, like guitar playing, is less about technique and technology and more about feel and emotion. She is fond of quoting James Brown, who said, “It’s not what you say; it’s the way how you say it.”

“I have a basement I’ve used as a home studio with a Mackie board and an eight-track,” Wilson said, “but eventually I got really sick of being an engineer. I sold everything or gave it away, and now it’s just a place to play. I record song ideas on a portable cassette recorder. Recently Ann and I had a writing session with Burt Bacharach,

and Ann also broke the commercial mold when they formed the Lovemongers in 1991.

“Ann and I had gotten an offer to play a benefit at the opera house in Seattle for the Red Cross,” Nancy recalled. “So we got our friends and cowriters Sue Ennis and Frank Cox to join us on keyboards, guitar, and vocals. We really



LANCE MERCIER

on his boom box. I felt vindicated somehow."

Wilson's songwriting process varies. "I start from melody ideas or lyrics—a full set of lyrics sometimes—or I'll start with only a guitar part. There is no better or worse way, but some of my favorite songs have come out of writing the guitar parts on acoustic first. Often, when you have lyrics, you're trying to fit something into the way the words fall, and you can get stiff or feel trapped into a rhyming scheme. The best way is to do it all at once where you have some idea of what you're going for and you sit down and let it come out of you without thinking so hard about it."

Wilson played some of her new originals in a series of solo acoustic shows in Santa Monica, California, in 1997, which resulted in the February

gathering some new material for our upcoming tour, and I was so pleased to see that Burt writes the same way.

He just used a boom box. Ann was singing her melody idea, clapping her leg in time, and Burt was recording it

1999 release of her first solo album, *Live at McCabe's Guitar Shop*. She also reinterpreted some Heart standards and

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played some of the songs that helped shape her music, such as Paul Simon's "Kathy's Song," Peter Gabriel's "In Your Eyes," and Joni Mitchell's "Case of You." The Mitchell cover, originally played on dulcimer, is one of Wilson's all-time favorite songs. "I was always trying to figure out a way to do 'Case of You' with only chords, but it didn't work out right," she said. "So finally I worked it out like Paul McCartney did in 'Blackbird,' with all those open positions that go up and down the neck, using mostly open strings."

Wilson plays all of the songs on the CD using her combination pick-and-fingerstyle technique, except for "The Rain Song," which is a straight fingerstyle piece. All of the tracks are in standard tuning except for "Ground Zero," which is in dropped-D. Wilson wrote "Love Mistake" for her manager, Kelly Curtis. "My friend had his heart broken big-time, and I had to write a song for him," she says. "The whole song sprang from the melody. Once I had the basic melody, I sat down and finished the song. Some songs are more about rhythm, others are more about storytelling, and some songs are just about melody."

The recording's one instrumental, "Leghead's Lament," is a rousing tribute to Wilson's friend Adrian Legg, the English guitarist who named his CD *Mrs. Crowe's Blue Waltz* after her (Wilson's married name is Crowe). "I had seen Adrian when he was in Seattle," says Wilson, "and we played together after his show. He asked if I wanted to produce his next album, and I agreed but then wasn't available to do it. The album's title was our joke."

Wilson is heading up new artistic alleys. Her 18-year marriage to feature film director Cameron Crowe has inspired a move in the direction of film scoring. "I have always wanted to do instrumentals," she says, "and now that I'm working on more film scoring ideas, I've been able to do that." The best-selling soundtrack to Crowe's 1996 film *Jerry Maguire* features two of Wilson's original pieces, including the delicate theme song, "We Meet Again."

Film scoring has opened up other creative avenues for Wilson as well. "I've reached a point where I have a definite style of my own," she says, "and I'm looking for ways to trick myself into learning new things. You get set in your ways, and it's hard to break out of that. Now that I've started doing more music scoring, I'm always looking

for new sounds to add into a score—everything from sampling the sound of cleaning out your garage to using the acoustic guitar as a resonator. I'm also looking at other tunings, because there you have no yardstick—it's all new chords and it keeps you fresher. Listening to new music, and playing with as many people as you can, also keeps you from getting into too much of a groove with your own style."

In support of her *Live at McCabe's* release, Wilson has hit the road with a number of solo dates. She has also joined with Ann to tour nationally as a stripped-down acoustic-electric duo, with Ann playing bass, guitar, piano, and flute and Nancy playing mostly acoustic guitar, plus some electric guitar, mandolin, piano, and blues harp.

As to whether Heart will ever gather for a reunion tour, there is always that possibility. In the meantime, the Wilsons are not lacking in intriguing musical projects or creative energy. "As far as Heart's concerned," says Nancy, "it feels like an ace that we've got up our sleeves. We can always pull it out, but we don't want to play it too soon, especially when everyone else is playing their aces!" ■

SELECTED RECORDINGS

NANCY WILSON

Live at McCabe's Guitar Shop, Epic 69837 (1999).

Starlicks Master Sessions with Nancy Wilson, Starlicks/Hal Leonard 324020. Instructional video on Wilson's acoustic guitar style; includes demonstrations of "These Dreams," "Mistral Wind," "Dreamboat Annie," and other songs.

Jerry Maguire soundtrack, Sony 67910 (1996).

THE LOVEMONGERS

Here Is Christmas, 2b 10170 (1998).

Whirligig, Will 33648 (1997).

HEART



Heart, Capitol 46157 (1985).

Bebe Le Strange, Epic 36371 (1980).

Dog and Butterfly, Portrait 35555 (1978).

Little Queen, Portrait 34799 (1977).

Dreamboat Annie, Capitol 46491 (1976).

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